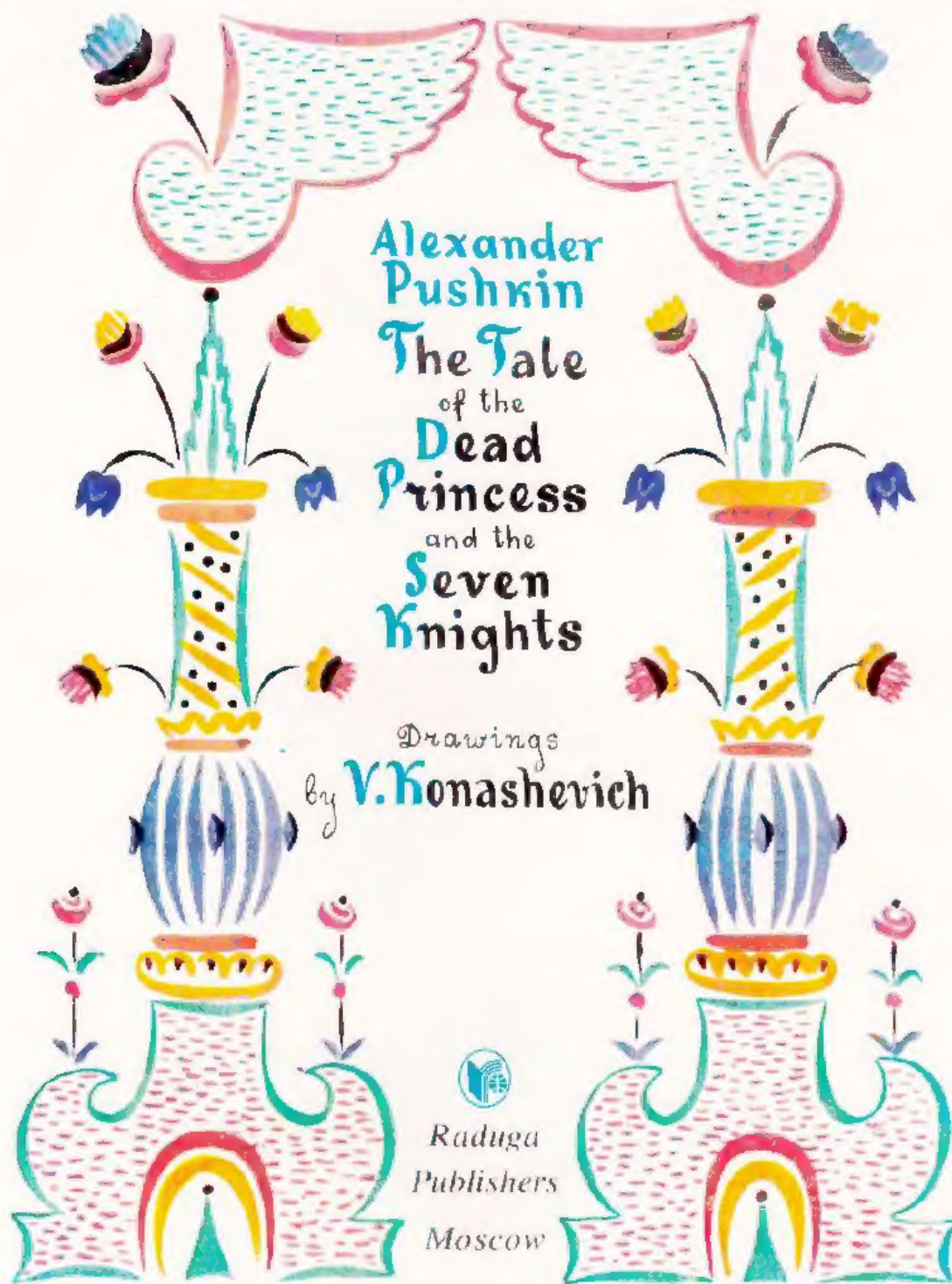


A. Pushkin

THE TALE
OF THE DEAD PRINCESS
AND THE SEVEN KNIGHTS







Alexander
Pushkin

The Tale
of the
Dead
Princess
and the
Seven
Knights

Drawings
by V. Konashevich



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With his suite the Tsar departed.
The Tsaritsa tender-hearted
At the window sat alone,
Wishing he would hurry home.
All day every day she waited,
Gazing till her dedicated
Eyes grew weak from overstrain,
Gazing at the empty plain.
Not a sign of her beloved!
Nothing but the snowflakes hurried
Heaping drifts upon the lea.
Earth was white as white could be.
Nine long months she sat and waited,
Kept her vigil unabated.
Then from God on Christmas Eve
She a daughter did receive.
Next day early in the morning,
Love and loyalty rewarding,
Home again from travel far
Came at last the father-Tsar.
One fond glance at him she darted,
Gasped for joy with thin lips parted
Then fell back upon her bed
And by prayer-time was dead.



Long the Tsar sat lonely, brooding.
But he, too, was only human.
Tears for one sad year he shed...
And another woman wed.
She (if one be strictly truthful)
Was a born Tsaritsa—youthful,
Slim, tall, fair to look upon,
Clever, witty—and so on.
But she was in equal measure
Stubborn, haughty, wilful, jealous.
In her dowry rich and vast
Was a little looking-glass.
It had this unique distinction:
It could speak with perfect diction.
Only with this glass would she
In a pleasant humour be.
Many times a day she'd greet it
And coquettishly entreat it:
"Tell me, pretty looking-glass,
Nothing but the truth, I ask:
Who in all the world is fairest
And has beauty of the rarest?"
And the looking-glass replied:
"You, it cannot be denied.
You in all the world are fairest
And your beauty is the rarest."
The Tsaritsa laughed with glee,
Shrugged her shoulders merrily,
Puffed her cheeks and bat her eyelids,
Flicked her fingers coyly, slyly,
Pranced around with hand on hips,
Arrogance upon her lips.



All this time the Tsar's own daughter
Quietly, as Nature taught her,
Grew and grew, and came quite soon
Like a flower into bloom:
Raven-browed, of fair complexion,
Breathing kindness and affection.
And the choice of fiancé
Lighted on Prince Yelisei.
Suit was made. The Tsar consented
And her dowry was indented:
Seven towns with wealthy store,
Mansion-houses—sevenscore.

On the night before the wedding
For a bridal party dressing
The Tsaritsa, time to pass,
Chatted with her looking-glass:
“Who in all the world is fairest
And has beauty of the rarest?”
Then what did the glass reply?
“You are fair, I can't deny.
But the Princess is the fairest
And her beauty is the rarest.”
Up the proud Tsaritsa jumped.
On the table how she thumped,
Angrily the mirror slapping,
Slipper heel in fury tapping!
“O you loathsome looking-glass,
Telling lies as bold as brass!
By what right is she my rival?
Such young folly I shall bridle.
So she's grown up—me to spite!
Little wonder she's so white:
With her bulging mother gazing
At that snow—what's so amazing!

Now look here, explain to me
How can she the fairer be?
Scour this realm of ours and seek well,
Nowhere shall you find my equal.
Is not that the truth?" she cried.
Still the looking-glass replied:
"But the Princess is the fairest
And her beauty is the rarest."
The Tsaritsa burst with spite,
Hurled the mirror out of sight
Underneath the nearest cupboard
And when breath she had recovered
Summoned Smudge, her chamber maid,
And to her instructions gave:
"Take the Princess to the forest,
Bind her hand and foot and forehead
To a tree! When wolves arrive
Let them eat the girl alive!"





Woman's wrath would daunt the devil!
Protest was no use whatever.
Soon the Princess left with Smudge
For the woods. So far they trudged
That the Princess guessed the reason.
Scared to death by such foul treason,
Loud she pleaded: "Spare my life!
Innocent of guilt am I!
Do not kill me, I beseech you!
And when I become Tsaritsa
I shall give you rich reward."
Smudge, who really loved her ward,
Being loth to kill or bind her,
Let her go, remarking kindly:
"God be with you! Do not moan!"
And, this said, went back alone.
"Well?" demanded the Tsaritsa,
"Where's that pretty little creature?"
"In the forest on her own,"
Smudge replied. "And there she'll stay.
To a tree I firmly lashed her.
When a hungry beast attacks her
She'll have little time to cry
And the quicker she shall die!"

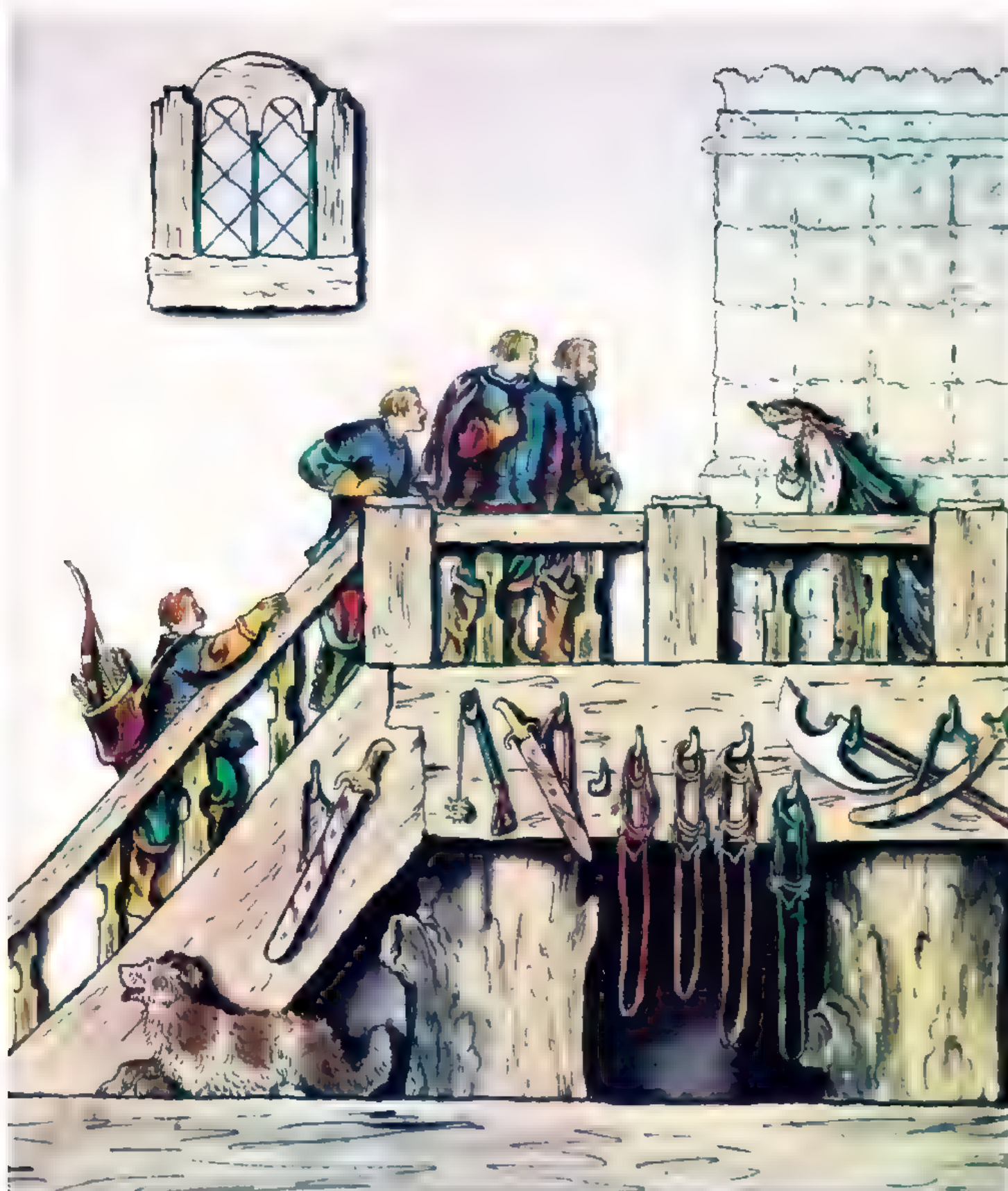
Rumour spread and caused a panic:
"What, the Tsar's own daughter vanished!"
Mournful was the Tsar that day.
But the young Prince Yelisei
Offered God a fervent prayer
And departed then and there
To seek out and homeward guide
His sweet-tempered, youthful bride.



Meanwhile his young bride kept walking
Through the forest until morning,
Vague as to her whereabouts.
Suddenly she spied a house.
Out a dog ran growling, yapping,
Then sat down, his tail tap-tapping.
At the gate there was no guard.
All was quiet in the yard.
Close at heel the good dog bounded
As the Princess slowly mounted
Stairs to gain the living floor,
Turned the ring upon the door.
Silently the door swung open
And before her eyes unfolded
A bright chamber: all around
Benches strewn with rugs she found,
Board of oak beneath the ikon
And a stove with tiles to lie on.
To the Princess it was clear
Kindly folk were dwelling here
Who would not deny her shelter.
No one was at home, however.
So she set to, cleaned the pans,
Made the whole house spick and span,
Lit a candle in the corner,
Fed the fire to be warmer,
Climbed onto the platform bed
There to lay her sleepy head.
Dinner time. The yard resounded,
Horses stamped and men dismounted.
Thick-moustached and ruddy-skinned,
Seven lusty Knights walked in.







Said the Eldest: "How amazing!
All so neat! The fire blazing!
Somebody's been cleaning here
And is waiting somewhere near.
Who is there? Come out of hiding!
Be a friend in peace abiding!
If you're someone old and hoar,
Be our uncle evermore!
If you're young and love a scuffle,
We'll embrace you as a brother,
If a venerable dame,
Then shall 'mother' be your name.
If a maiden fair, we'll call you
Our dear sister and adore you."

So the Princess rose, came down
To the Seven Knights and bowed,
Her good wishes emphasising,
Blushing and apologising
That to their delightful home
Uninvited she had come.
Straight they saw her speech bore witness
To the presence of a Princess.
So they cleared a corner seat,
Offered her a pie with meat,
Filled a glass with wine and served it
On a tray, as she deserved it.
But the glass of heady wine
She politely did decline
And the pie she broke with caution,
Savouring a tiny portion.
Pleading she was very tired,
Soon she gracefully retired
And the Seven Knights conveyed her
To the best and brightest chamber

And, away as they did creep,
She was falling fast asleep.



Days flew by—the Princess living
All the time without misgiving
In the forest, never bored
With the Seven Knights abroad.
Darkness would the earth still cover
When at dawn the seven brothers
Would ride out to try their luck
With a long-bow, shooting duck,
Or to ply their sword in battle
And a Saracen unsaddle,
Headlong at a Tartar go,
Chop his head off at a blow,
Or give chase to a Circassian,
From the forest send him dashing.





She, as lady of the house,
Rose much later, moved about
Dusting, polishing and cooking,
Never once the Knights rebuking.
They, too, never chided her.
Days flew by like gossamer.

And in time they grew to love her.
Thereupon all seven brothers
Shortly after dawn one day
To her chamber made their way
And the Eldest Knight addressed her:
"As you know, you are our sister.
But all seven of us here
Are in love with you, my dear,
And we all desire your favours.
But that must not be, God save us!
Find some way to give us peace!
Be a wife to one at least,
To the rest remain a sister!
But you shake your head. Is this to
Say our offer you refuse?
Nothing from our stock you'll choose?"

"O my brave and bonny brothers,
Virtuous beyond all others!"
In reply the Princess said,
"God in heaven strike me dead
If my answer be not honest:
I've no choice—my hand is promised!
You're all equal in my eyes,
All so valiant and wise,
And I love you all, dear brothers!"

But my heart is to another
Pledged for evermore. One day
I shall wed Prince Yelisei!"

Hushed, the brothers kept their station,
Scratched their foreheads in frustration.
"As you wish! So now we know,"
Said the Eldest with a bow.
"Pray forgive us—and I promise
You'll hear nothing further from us!"
"I'm not angry," she replied.
"By my pledge I must abide."
Bowing low, the seven suitors
Left her room with passions muted.
So in harmony again
Did they live and friendship reign.

The Tsaritsa was still livid
Every time she saw in vivid
Memory the Princess fair.
Long the mirror, lying there,
Was the object of her hatred;
But at last her wrath abated.
So one day it came to pass
That she took the looking-glass
Up again and sat before it,
Smiled and, as before, implored it:
"Greetings, pretty looking-glass!
Tell me all the truth, I ask:
Who in all the world is fairest
And has beauty of the rarest?"
Said the mirror in reply:
"You are fair, I can't deny.



But where Seven Knights go riding
In a green oak-grove residing
Humbly lives a person who
Is more beautiful than you."
The Tsaritsa's wrath descended
On her maid: "What folly tempted
You to lie? You disobeyed!"
Smudge a full confession made...
Uttering a threat of torture,
The Tsaritsa grimly swore to
Send the Princess to her death
Or not draw another breath.



One day by her window waiting
For her brothers homeward hasting
Sat the young Princess and span.
Suddenly the dog began
Barking. Through the courtyard scurried
A poor beggar-woman, worried
By the dog she kept at bay
With her stick. "Don't go away!
Stay there, stay!" the Princess shouted,
From the window leaning outward.
"Let me call the dog to heel
And I'll offer you a meal."

And the beggar-woman answered:
"Pretty child, you take my fancy!
For that dog of yours, you see,
Could well be the death of me.
See him snarling, bristling yonder!
Come here, child!" The Princess wanted
To go out, and took a loaf.
But the dog its body wove
Round her feet, refused to let her
Step towards the woman-beggar.
When the woman, too, drew near,
Wilder than an angry bear
It attacked her. How perplexing!
"Had a bad night's sleep, I reckon!"
Said the Princess. "Catch it! There!"
And the bread flew through the air.
The poor beggar-woman caught it.
"I most humbly thank you, daughter,
God be merciful!" said she.
"In return take this from me!"
The bright apple she was holding,
Newly picked, fresh, ripe and golden,
Straight towards the Princess flew...
How the dog leapt in pursuit!
But the Princess neatly trapped it
In her palms. "Enjoy the apple
At you leisure, little pet!
Thank you for the loaf of bread..."
Said the beggar-woman, brandished
In the air her stick and vanished...
Up the stairs the Princess ran
With the dog, which then began
Pitifully staring, whining
Just as if its heart were pining
For the gift of speech to say:
"Throw that apple far away!"

Hastily his neck she patted:
"Hey, Sokolko, what's the matter?
Lie down!" Entering once more
Her own room, she shut the door,
Sat there with her spindle humming,
Waiting for her brothers' coming.
But she could not take her gaze
From the apple where it lay
Full of fragrance, rosy, glowing,
Fresh and juicy, ripe and golden,
Sweet as honey to the lips!
She could even see the pips...
First the Princess thought of waiting
Until dinner. But temptation
Proved too strong. She grasped the bright
Apple, took a stealthy bite
And with fair cheek sweetly hollowed
A delicious morsel swallowed.
All at once her breathing stopped,
Listlessly her white arms dropped.
From her lap the rosy apple
Tumbled to the floor. The hapless
Maiden closed her swooning eyes,
Reeled and fell without a cry,
On the bench her forehead striking,
Then lay still beneath the ikon...



Now the brothers, as it chanced,
Were returning in a band
From another warlike foray.
Out to meet them in the forest
Went the dog and, running hard,
Led them straight into the yard.
Said the Knights: "An evil omen!
Grief in store!" The door they opened,
Walked into the room and gasped.
But the dog like lightning dashed
For the apple and devoured it.
Death that instant overpowered it.
For the apple was, they saw,
Filled with poison to the core.
By the dead Princess the brothers
Bent their heads in tears and uttered
Holy prayer to save her soul;
Nothing could their grief console.
From the bench they raised her, dressed her,
Wished within a grave to rest her,
Then had second thoughts. For she
Was as rosy as if sleep
Garlands of repose were wreathing
Round her—though she was not breathing.
Three whole days they waited, but
Still her eyes were tightly shut.
So that night with solemn ritual
In a coffin made of crystal
They laid out the body fair
Of the Princess and from there
To a hollow mountain bore her,
Where a tomb they fashioned for her:
Iron chains they used to fix
Her glass case to pillars six
With due caution, and erected
Iron railings to protect it.



Then the Eldest smote his breast
And the dead Princess addressed:
"Ever peaceful be your slumber!
Though your days were few in number
On this earth—spite took its toll—
Yet shall heaven have your soul.
With pure love did we regard you,
For your loved one did we guard you,
But you came not to the groom,
Only to a chill dark tomb."

That same day the bad Tsaritsa,
Waiting for good news to reach her,
Secretly the mirror took
And her usual question put:
"Who is now by far the fairest
And has beauty of the rarest?"
And the answer satisfied:
"You, it cannot be denied.
You in all the world are fairest
And your beauty is the rarest!"

In pursuit of his sweet bride
Through the country far and wide
Still Prince Yelisei goes riding,
Weeping bitterly. No tidings!
For no matter whom he asks
People either turn their backs
Or most rudely rock with laughter:
No one knows what he is after.
Now to the bright Sun in zeal
Did the bold young Prince appeal:



"Sun, dear Sun! The whole year coursing
Through the sky, in springtime thawing
From the chill earth winter snow!
You observe us all below.
Surely you'll not grudge an answer?
Tell me, did you ever chance to
See the Princess I revere?
I'm her fiancé." "My dear,"
Said the Sun with some insistence,
"I have nowhere seen your Princess,
So she's dead, we must presume,
That is, if my friend, the Moon,
Has not met her on his travels
Or seen clues you may unravel."



Through the dark night Yelisei,
Feeling anything but gay,
With a lover's perseverance
Waited for the Moon's appearance.
"Moon, O Moon, my friend!" he said,
"Gold of horn and round of head,
From the darkest shadows rising,
With your eye the world apprizing,
You whom stars with love regard
As you mount your nightly guard!
Surely you'll not grudge an answer?
Tell me, did you ever chance to
See the Princess I revere?
I'm her fiancé." "O dear!"
Said the Moon in consternation,
"No, I have not seen the maiden."



On my round I only go
When it is my turn, you know.
It would seem that I was resting
When she passed." "How very vexing!"
Cried aloud Prince Yelisei.
But the Moon went on to say:
"Wait a minute! I suggest you
Have the Wind come to the rescue.
Call him now! It's worth a try.
And cheer up a bit! Goodbye!"

Yelisei, not losing courage,
To the Wind's abode now hurried.
"Wind, O Wind! Lord of the sky,
Herding flocks of clouds on high,
Stirring up the dark-blue ocean,
Setting all the air in motion,
Unafraid of anyone
Saving God in heaven alone!
Surely you'll not grudge an answer?
Tell me, did you ever chance to
See the Princess I revere?
I'm her fiancé." "O hear!"
Said the Wind in turmoil blowing.
"Where a quiet stream is flowing
Stands a mountain high and steep
In it lies a cavern deep;
In this cave in shadows dismal
Sways a coffin made of crystal.
Hung by chains from pillars six.
Round it barren land in which
No man ever meets another.
In that tomb your bride discover!"



With a howl the Wind was gone.
Yelisei wept loud and long.
To the barren land he journeyed
Desperately, sadly yearning
Once again to see his bride.
On he rode. A mountain high
Rose before him, soaring steeply
From a land laid waste completely.
At its foot—an entrance dim.
Yelisei went quickly in.
There, he saw, in shadows dismal
Swayed a coffin made of crystal
Where the Princess lay at rest
In the deep sleep of the blest.
And the Prince in tears dissolving
Threw himself upon the coffin...
And it broke! The maiden straight
Came to life, sat up, in great
Wonder looked about and yawning
As she set her bed see-sawing
Said with pretty arms outstretched:
"Gracious me! How long I've slept!"



Down she stepped from out the coffin...
O the sighing and the sobbing!
Carrying his bride, he strode
Back to daylight. Home they rode,



Making pleasant conversation
Till they reached their destination.
Swiftly rumour spread around:
"The Princess is safe and sound!"



It so happened the Tsaritsa
In her room was idly seated
By her magic looking-glass
And to pass the time did ask:
"Who in all the world is fairest
And has beauty of the rarest?"
Said the mirror in reply:
"You are fair, I can't deny,
But the Princess is the fairest
And her beauty is the rarest!"
The Tsaritsa leapt and smashed
On the floor her looking-glass,
Rushing to the door she saw the
Fair young Princess walk towards her.





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